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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000285

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTANI AND AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENTS TALK FOR
THE FIRST TIME SINCE 2001

Classified By: Classified by Charge d'Affaires a.i. Jennifer L. Brush f
or reasons 1.4(B) and (D).

Summary

11. (C) Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov called Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev March 13, and, according to Foreign Affairs Deputy Chairman/Minister Rashit Meredov, had a "very productive" conversation and agreed to exchange visits. Ashgabat-based diplomats from FSU missions and the Turkish embassy, hoping to facilitate construction of a Trans-Caspian pipeline, confirmed that they had been encouraging both leaders for some time to take this step. This conversation, and the pressure from neighboring countries leading up to it, is a positive signal that the newly independent states are beginning to stand up for their own interests, even it that means taking on Russia. End Summary.

Berdimuhammedov to Aliyev: Let's Talk

12. (U) State-run Turkmenistan media reported March 14 that Berdimuhammedov and Aliyev talked by phone on March 13. Berdimuhammedov thanked Aliyev for his congratulatory letter on Berdimuhammedov's election as president, and the two agreed to promote a more active bilateral relationship. The two also agreed to create bilateral commissions on cooperation issues in various sectors -- and to exchange visits.

Phone Conversation "Very Productive;" Regional Neighbors
Pleased

13. (C) Turkmenistan's Foreign Affairs Deputy Chairman/Minister Rashit Meredov told the Charge that Berdimuhammedov initiated the call and that the discussion had been "very productive." The Deputy Chief of Mission at the Azerbaijani Embassy confirmed to A/DCM that the

atmosphere between the two leaders was "very good." The call had come as a surprise, at least to working-level personnel at the embassy. Turkish Ambassador Akil predictably took the credit for Berdimuhammedov's initiative, saying that, although all missions in the region had been urging the two leaders to reestablish communications, it was Turkey that succeeded in persuading Turkmenistan's new president to take this significant first step. Georgian Ambassador Petriashvili confirmed that Georgian diplomats had been working both in Baku and in Ashgabat to encourage the two sides to talk. He said that Georgian President Saakashvili had urged Berdimuhammedov to improve relations with Azerbaijan during their February 14 meeting on the occasion of Berdimuhammedov's inauguration. Joining in the diplomatic corps' new guessing game of where in the world Berdimuhammedov will go first, Petriashvili said he thought it likely that the president would go to Moscow first, if only to counter all the attention USG bilateral relations with Turkmenistan were receiving, and now the Azerbaijan initiative.

Ongoing Tension

14. (SBU) The last time that the two countries' leaders spoke was in Isbanbul in 2001 at a Turkic-speaking countries summit. Late Presidents Heydar Aliyev's and Niyazov's mutual antipathy was legendary and Niyazov carried this over to his feelings for Aliyev Jr. The roiling dispute over oil fields in the Caspian Sea -- and a still-outstanding Azeri gas debt to Turkmenistan (the exact size of the debt remains under dispute, with the Azeris claiming a debt of \$18-23 million

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and Turkmenistan seeking \$33-50 million) -- remained unresolved, despite formation of a joint task force in 1998 and periodic meetings of working groups since that time to delimit the Caspian border. Ongoing concerns over discrimination faced by the small Azeri ethnic minority community based largely in Turkmenbashi -- mostly Shi'a Muslims -- in Sunni Muslim Turkmenistan also fueled the bilateral enmity.

Comment

15. (C) Most here agree that the bad feelings mostly were personal and counter-productive. Plenty of Azeris lead fully integrated lives in Turkmenistan and even Meredov himself is half Azeri. With the main protagonists out of the way, relations between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan have the real potential to improve. More significantly, the constructive role played by countries in the region, particularly by Georgia, show an increased willingness on the part of the not-so-newly independent states to stand up for their own interests, even if it means taking on Russia. Local Former Soviet Union ambassadors have frequently told Charge over the years that Russia was fanning the discord between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, if only to throw obstacles in the way of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline. Berdimuhammedov may very well make his first international stop Moscow after the Azerbaijani initiative, if only to try to convince the Russians that existing contracts will be honored and that pipeline diversification does not have to hurt Russian interests.

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